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Historically Black Colleges Seek Continued Supplemental Aid

By KELLY FIELD

When Congress provided historically black colleges and other minority-serving institutions with a temporary increase in aid two years ago, lawmakers told the colleges not to count on any additional funds.

Still, many of the colleges were stung when President Obama, who supported the increase when he was in the Senate, chose not to renew the two-year, \$255-million annual increase in his budget request for the 2010 fiscal year. They say the decision raises questions about the administration's commitment to the nation's 105 historically black colleges and universities, or HBCU's, which represent just 3 percent of the nation's colleges but graduate 20 percent of its black undergraduates.

"It suggests that HBCU's are not a priority" of the administration, said Lezli Baskerville, president of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, which represents historically black colleges.

Education Department officials say that view misses the bigger picture. While the president's budget would not renew the supplemental money, it would provide most minority-serving institutions with 5 percent more money in 2010 than they would have received this year without the temporary supplemental aid. At a time when the president is proposing level spending on most higher-education programs, "it's clear that HBCU's are a priority," said Robert M. Shireman, deputy under secretary of education.

He points out that many students attending minority-serving institutions would benefit from the president's plan to make financing the Pell Grant program mandatory and index the maximum award to inflation. In 2007-8, half of the students at historically black colleges received Pell Grants, compared with 27 percent of students attending other institutions.

The fight over spending on minority-serving institutions illustrates the problems that can occur when legislators provide short-term influxes for higher-education programs. Although the money may be designated as temporary, colleges and students quickly come to count on it and expect it to continue. When it runs out, it feels like a cut, even though it isn't.

Colleges Were Warned

In this case, the extra money came in a budget-balancing bill enacted by Congress in 2007. The bill, which slashed subsidies to student lenders by \$21-billion, used a portion of the savings to

increase spending on minority-serving institutions by \$510-million over two years. Of that money, \$200-million was set aside for grants to strengthen mathematics, science, and technology programs at Hispanic-serving institutions, and \$170-million was reserved for historically black colleges. In 2008 and again in 2009, 96 of them received an average of \$885,000 each.

Smaller amounts were allocated to tribal colleges (\$60-million), Alaska Native- and Native Hawaiian-serving institutions (\$30-million) and other institutions educating large numbers of minority students.

In notices two years ago announcing grant competitions for the money, the Education Department emphasized that the support was temporary and urged colleges to use it for short-term purposes.

“Institutions were told not to spend it on things that were carried over,” said William A. (Buddy) Blakey, a lawyer who has represented historically black colleges. The government said, “Buy things, like computers. Don’t hire faculty.”

“Most institutions did that,” he said.

Still, at least some of the colleges put their grants toward new projects and salaries. North Carolina Central University, which received \$1.3-million this academic year, spent roughly half of the money on an emergency-communications system but it used most of the remainder to create an academic-advising and tutoring center for first- and second-year students. A large portion of that money paid the salaries of academic advisers.

The loss of that aid could force the university to scale back its retention efforts or shift money from other programs to pay for them, said Charlie Nelms, the chancellor.

North Carolina Central had never been led to believe that the money would be renewed, said Mr. Nelms, who refuses to call President Obama’s budget plan a “cut.” The chancellor said his university had accepted the federal grant “with the understanding that it was a two-year proposal.”

The real question is not whether the government broke any promises with this pot of money, he said, but “whether or not HBCU’s and other minority-serving institutions are appropriately funded to fulfill the mandate we’ve been given.”

The answer, he argues, is no. He estimates that his institution, which has doubled in size over the last decade, needs about \$10-million in state and federal aid to meet the needs of its students, many of whom are from low-income families and are academically underprepared for college. This year, the university received \$7.5-million in federal grants and supplemental aid.

Making the Case

Michael L. Lomax, president of the United Negro College Fund, said the federal program’s expiration would come at a “terrible time” for the nation’s minority-serving institutions, which

have been hard hit by the economic downturn and face budget cuts in many states, including North Carolina. Since Congress appropriated the extra money two years ago, those colleges, like many others, have seen donations dry up and their already modest endowments shrink.

“These dollars were, as it turned out given the precipitous decline in the economy, very helpful,” Mr. Lomax said. “To lose them at a time when the economy remains weak is something we need to vigorously oppose.”

Minority-serving institutions have a strong case to make, he said. Compared with other colleges, they tend to serve students who come from lower-income families and who are likelier to need extra academic preparation. Those are precisely the kinds of students the nation will need to graduate more of if it is going to meet President Obama’s goal of leading the world in college-completion rates by 2020.

But those very demographics could also complicate advocates’ efforts to win Congressional support for more aid. While historically black colleges graduate a disproportionate share of the nation’s black scientists, engineers, and teachers, they also have lower-than-average graduation rates over all, particularly among black men. According to a recent analysis by the Associated Press, only 29 percent of men attending historically black colleges complete bachelor’s degrees within six years.

Mr. Lomax said historically black colleges are working hard to improve graduation rates but can’t do so without sufficient federal aid. “We are prepared to be held accountable, but we also need the resources to do that work,” he said.

'We're Still Fighting'

With Congress set to begin hearings today on a fiscal-2010 spending bill for education, advocates of continuing the supplemental aid are counting on support from the Congressional Black Caucus and lawmakers from states with large numbers of historically black colleges, such as North Carolina, which has 10.

Already North Carolina's two senators, Richard M. Burr, a Republican, and Kay R. Hagan, a Democrat, have sent letters to the Senate Appropriations Committee's Democratic chairman and top Republican to urge increased support for historically black colleges.

Those colleges will join forces with tribal colleges and Hispanic-serving institutions in their fight for more funds. Gumeindo Salas, vice president for government relations at the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, said member institutions were “very disappointed” that the president had not chosen to renew the short-term money, but “haven’t given up.”

“We’re still fighting,” he said.

To win the battle, minority-serving colleges will have to have to do more than warn of dire consequences if the money expires. They will also have to convince lawmakers that historically

black colleges and other minority-serving institutions serve a crucial role in the nation's higher-education system, educating students who would otherwise slip through the cracks.

"We have to tell our story more vibrantly," said Mr. Nelms, of North Carolina Central, "as opposed to simply saying, 'Don't cut.'"